

Las Plantas de la Milpa entre los Maya. Silvia Terán, Christian Rasmussen, and Olivio May Cauich. Mérida: Fundación Tun Ben Kin, Calle 15-B No. 90, Col. Chuburná, CP 97200, Mérida, Yucatán, México. Pp. 278, including many color plates; 14 further unnumbered pp. of color plates following p. 278. Bibliography; no index. ISBN 970-92060-0-1.

This superb study presents exhaustive detail about the commoner plants cultivated by the Yucatec Maya farmers of Xocen, a large and extremely tradition-conscious farming community in the remote eastern forests of Yucatán state. The book brings together virtually all the practical knowledge, medicinal lore, and religious belief that the farmers of Xocen could relate to the investigators. An earlier companion volume, Terán and Rasmussen's *La milpa de los Mayas* (1994), provided the relevant biological, pedological and agronomic data, as well as much detail on local fauna and flora. These two books, between them, give by far the best and most comprehensive picture available of agriculture in the lowlands of southeast Mexico. As such, they are indispensable for archaeologists working in the Maya area, as well as for ethnobotanists interested in traditional tropical agriculture.

Las plantas de la milpa entre los Mayas includes data on planting, irrigation, pests and pest control, and uses, including food, medicine, forage, and magic. It also provides long texts, taken down directly from Maya farmers' narration and translated into Spanish, about the plants in question. It also contains a long and powerful prayer, delivered by the ceremonial leader at a first-fruits rite in a milpa. This oration, given in Maya and in Spanish translation, is one of the longest, richest, and most religiously interesting Maya ceremonial texts ever published, and would well repay serious study. It contains some ethnozoological interest; the eagle-hawks and hawks are called in to control the jays and blackbirds that would eat the maize. Maize is significantly referred to as *gracia*, a Spanish word used in Maya for divinities and divine matters. (It is worth mentioning that the Maya epithet for Jesus, *kichkelem yum* ["handsome lord"], is apparently a term formerly used for the Maize God.) Another valuable inclusion is a collection of traditional foods, as described by their makers. Christian Rasmussen's color photographs are not only excellent; they are also particularly well chosen for their scientific value.

With this book, Xocen becomes one of the most thoroughly ethnobotanized communities in the world, ranking with Chamula and Tenejapa in Chiapas. In addition to the work of the Terán-Rasmussen group, we have the superb study of forage and animal feeds by Elena Acosta Bustillos (Acosta Bustillos et al. 1998), and Herrera's truly magisterial study of gardens and orchards in the nearby daughter community of Xuilub (Herrera Castro 1994). There is also substantial work by Bruce Love on religion, largely—alas—unpublished. However, from nearby Becanchen, Love brings us a description of a field ceremony with Maya oration text, that is closely comparable to the one in the book under review (Love and Peraza 1984). Xocen regards itself as the center of the world, and perhaps it is, at least as far as lowland tropical ethnobotany is concerned.

However, Xocen has also lost its sacred book. According to local tradition, somebody (accounts differ) borrowed the book and never returned it. This too

may be all too prophetic of the future, for the books written about Xocen are difficult to find. Like so many studies of south Mexican life and ecology, the book under review was published in a small edition and distributed locally. The "Fundación Tun Ben Kin" is a two-person operation; Terán and Rasmussen are an independent ethnographic team, their work supported largely by the Danish aid organization Danida. Olivio May Cauich, their collaborator, is a Xocen Maya. The book can be obtained only by writing the authors or emailing them at chasmus@prodigy.net.mx. The companion volume was also self-published, and is more or less exhausted. An earlier, and invaluable, collection of texts from Xocen was mimeographed, and distributed (with governmental help) to bilingual schools in the area, most of whom promptly lost it. It deserves full publication. The works of Herrera and Acosta are less obscure, being available from the publisher, but are not easy to find otherwise.

Ethnobiologists should make sure that these books are in their local libraries!

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